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it, then digs a hole, puts in the image, and buries it. It is left there and starts to swell up. As soon as it does so noticeably, the rain starts.

Another method is to take a pile of dangi bark (used for poisoning fish) and beat it thoroughly with a stone. Large armfuls of green grass are then gathered, the dangi is placed inside of the grass, and all of it tied in a bundle. Stones are then placed on top of the grass, and the bundle is carried out into the sea or fresh water to the height of a man's shoulders and dropped. The man then comes up out of the water and sings the sound of rain falling and pushes the water with his hand, which causes it to splash as though rain were falling in it. He says, "In three days there will be clouds and in four days there will be rain."

The bundle can also be made into a human image, which can be and usually is given the name of the maker.

If one wants the rain to cease, the grass is taken out and thrown about so that it will dry, and the rain then stops. If it continues to such an extent that a huge flood sweeps down from the bush country a very powerful medicine man may dive into the flood water, catch the offending sacred python who is causing the flood, and send him back into his water house, which causes the waters to recede. A few years ago a tremendous flood came down the Buckingham River and went higher and higher until the people climbed the highest trees with their babies and dogs. The flood came still higher and faster, and finally it knocked some of the children, dogs, and babies, and a few of the older people into the water and drowned them. Warlumbopo, the Ritarngo medicine man, with the help of his familiars, dived in the water and caught Muit, the totemic python, pulled him back, and sent him down into the well again. The rain stopped and the flood ceased. Only medicine men understand how to do this.

Murngin believe they cannot stop rain if it comes by itself. Sometimes they think that it has been caused by people in other countries performing the magic. Nothing can be done about it unless the people themselves take the proper methods to stop the magic from working.

THE MURNGIN PHARMACOPOEIA

The Murngin do not depend entirely upon magic for curing their illnesses. They have a fairly extensive pharmacopoeia which includes both animal and plant remedies. Each illness has a special treatment applied to it. If a sick man has been treated with herbs he can also

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278 be treated by magic, which is felt to be much more potent. Some of
757 the herb remedies have magic mixed in with them.

Vomiting and Stomachache.—A nest of green ants is gathered, placed in a water-tight container, and put over a fire to kill the ants and eggs. Water is then poured upon the contents and the ants crushed in the hands so that the acid from the insects becomes infused into the water. The water is then drunk by the person who is ill. If a baby has a stomach complaint he is forced to drink some of this liquid, and the mother's breasts are rubbed with it. The natives say that it tastes much like tamarind bean soup.

755 *Diarrhea or Dysentery.*—One of the treatments for dysentery and diarrhea is to take some of the excrement and place it near a red ant bed. The ants carry the excrement inside their mound. This is supposed to cure a man in a short time, since there is a mingling of the power of the ant bed and of the man.

278 *Headache.*—The leaves of the mu-tir (unidentified) are gathered by
757 a woman, and an infusion of them is made and rubbed over the head, face, and upper body of the ailing person. The leaves are rough, and the Murngin say, "This is just the same as rubbing sand over the body. It feels rough. When a man has a headache it is just the same as if he had dirt on his head and this cleans it off."

Sore Throat.—Drinking an infusion of broken-up leaves of the paper-bark tree is supposed to relieve a sore throat; sometimes it is drunk only for the pleasure. The fruit from the ne-urk tree is chewed to relieve a cough.

Heavy Throat or Chest Cold (girri girri).—The inner bark of the stringy-bark eucalyptus tree is chewed and swallowed to relieve congestion.

Tooth- or Earache.—The bark of the small plum tree found in the area is removed, the trunk is put in the fire until it becomes hot, and a portion is placed over the aching tooth or against the ear.

Bungeye (bam-bai).—This ailment is frequent among the natives and goes through a group every few months. Either one or both of the eyes swell and close for three or four days. Salt water is poured on shavings of the plum tree (dangapa). The infusion is then poured into the eyes of the prone patient for half an hour or so.—Bungeye is supposed to be caused by dirt in the corner of the eye, and not by watching anything which is ritually unclean.

278 *Granuloma, Yaws, and Wound from a Spear.*—The bark is taken
752 from the tree which produces fish poison, broken up, and placed in

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water. The container is put on red-hot stones to heat. When the water has boiled sufficiently to form a poultice the latter is cooled slightly and placed on the sore or wound. 278 752

Granuloma, yaws, and spear wounds can all be caused by magic. It is thought that a magician can cause them by stabbing a sting-ray prong into the track of his victim while at the same time calling out the name of the object of his magic or by singing one of the black magic songs. It is also believed that yaws in the nose and mouth can be caused by a man's throwing away his nasal septum stick, which is found by an enemy and placed between two branches of a tree that rub together. This smashes the nose piece, and the man's nose and mouth are affected by this process. 754

Sometimes if a man has a yaws sore on his foot a live clam is found and the foot placed over it. The clam is supposed to suck the soreness from it. When a man has been wounded, frequently one of his kinsmen places his fingers in the wound to see if the spear has gone through to a vital spot or not. If he cannot feel flesh at the end of his finger it is believed the man will die. 755

Sting-ray or Catfish Wound.—A variety of the bush beetle is macerated and rubbed on the wound. "It makes the sore feel quiet and easy." Cockroaches are also used in the same way. 278 752

Poisoning from Untreated Cycad Palm Nuts.—Occasionally children are made violently ill or die from eating untreated cycad nuts. The natives attempt a cure by rubbing the hair with the stickers from the leaf of the pandanus. 278 757

Ringworm (pur-o-pur-o).—This is "caused from nothing," for, according to Murngin thinking, it is due to a man's scratching himself, no magic being involved. Ringworm is treated by rubbing the offal found in a bees' nest or red ocher on the ringworm scales.

Constipation.—The yellow pollen found in a honeybees' nest is eaten dry. "It acts just like that Epsom salts you have," said my informant.

Festering Splinters.—The splinter is allowed to remain in the flesh until it festers, when it is easily taken out. Beeswax is made into a small splinter and pushed into the hole where the splinter has been. A firebrand is then touched to the end of the wax; this melts the inner part of it and allows it to penetrate farther into the sore. This is done particularly if the splinter is in the foot for it enables the man to walk more easily. 278 752

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of them are in a condition of perfect physical fitness, lithe and graceful in all their movements, and tireless in their own pursuits. 142

Various diseases, such as yaws, tropical ulcers, and ophthalmia, are frequently observed, while there are some cases of gangosa, granuloma, and leprosy. Epidemics of measles, influenza and whooping cough have upon occasion been carried through from the outer fringes of settlement, and have badly stricken these isolated tribes. 164

These aborigines will survive an almost unbelievable amount of physical injury, but they quickly succumb to diseases of a general character, particularly to fevers and pulmonary complaints, against which no constitutional powers of resistance have been developed. Considerable medicinal use is made of a wide variety of herbs and plants, but most of their practices in this realm are crude and of little value. In many cases it is believed that, as magic has caused disease, so counteractive magic will heal. 755 757

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ABORIGINAL MEDICAL PRACTICE IN EAST ARNHEM LAND

By T. THEODOR WEBB[1]

AS would naturally be expected among so primitive a people as the aborigines of East Arnhem Land the operation of magic, both in causing and in relieving sickness, is largely believed in. Apart from this, however, there is found the fairly extensive use of certain vegetable products which are at least believed to be of medicinal value.[2] In some cases the treatment consists of a combination of magic and the administration of medicine. Moreover, where medical treatment proves non-effective one may always fall back on evil magic as the explanation of failure.

One of the complaints from which these people frequently suffer is muscular rheumatism, particularly in the lumbar region. In such a case, should there be a *marrngit*, magician, in the neighbourhood, his aid will be sought, and he operates in the following way. Presuming the patient is suffering from backache, the *marrngit* has him lie face downward in the sand, and then proceeds to feel carefully all over his back. He then arises, breaks off a small leafy branch and dances round the patient, swishing vigorously with the branch. Presently he dashes away to a considerable distance as though in pursuit of something, and still swishing his branch. This is done to drive off the evil spirit which is responsible for the man's condition and which the *marrngit* alone is able to see. Having accomplished this purpose he returns to the patient. He now selects one spot on the man's back, which he presses and kneads thoroughly, after which he massages the surrounding area, working all the time toward

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[2] Unfortunately I am not a botanist, nor have I been able to discover any literature which might enable me to identify many of the trees and plants used and which are peculiar to these northern regions.

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the patient is washed from head to foot by having water poured over him. This ceremony is believed to be particularly efficacious in cases of injury which have caused bleeding. In such cases not only does it aid the person's recovery, but also removes the tabu attaching to the shed blood. If, in the course of hunting, a man has been so injured, he must not give of his catch to another until by this ceremony he has been cleansed. This same ceremony is also used for the purification of the relatives of a recently deceased person. If a man be near his sacred pool the ceremony is performed there and he is washed in the actual " holy water " itself.

The most elaborate medical treatment of which I have knowledge is that carried out in cases of extreme constipation or for a severe attack of indigestion leading to a distension of the stomach and known as *worba*. First of all a rough platform of sticks is constructed. On this platform is laid a thick covering of leafy branches of *maipin* (ironwood tree) and on these leaves a covering of wet grass from some fresh water pool or swamp.

The sand beneath the platform is then scooped out and a fire made, which must be wholly of *maipin*, the leaves, bark, gum, and wood being used. When the fire is well burning the patient is placed, face downward, on the platform already prepared, a covering of boughs or paper-bark is placed over him, and there he is left for several hours to steam. He is then turned over on his back, and thus spends several more hours. At the end of the day he is bathed with cold water, and will almost certainly feel relieved, but if not, the process may be repeated the following day. In cases where no relief is afforded it is consequently known that the patient's condition is the result of evil magic. It is believed to be produced by some sorcerer getting hold of something belonging to the patient—his loin-cloth or *balara* (pubic shield) being considered particularly effective. After " singing " this article he opens out the coals and ashes of his fire, and in the centre digs a small hole, into which he crams it. He then fills the hole with earth, scrapes back the coals and ashes, and once more " sings " over it his evil chant, at the same time naming the man he wishes to injure. This operation results in a stoppage of the man's bowels, and so produces a condition which nothing can relieve, and which ultimately ends in death.

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thin sheet of paper-bark and placed on the sore. This is then bitten either by the man himself or by a companion. The sore, hearing the crunching of the charcoal, learns that some one is fighting it, and so takes its departure.

Bleeding is resorted to in cases of severe headache, and less frequently for backache. For the former a deep cut is made above the brow, usually by a single blow with an iron or flint spear-head. Another method is to take a splinter of glass or flint, and with a flick of the wrist to make a cut in the inner corner of the eye. Still another is to take a piece of *baku*, a trailing cane, split it and shape it to a sharp point. This piece of cane is then thrust up one of the nostrils, and is kept there with the finger plugging the nostril until a throbbing sensation begins. It is then quickly withdrawn, and is followed by profuse bleeding.

For wounds such as those inflicted by iron- or stone-headed spears the male flower stalk of the *woragar* (cicad) is used. This is split open and the soft centre obtained, which is cut into small pieces placed in a *dzakaruŋ*, paper-bark basket, mixed with urine, warmed by dropping a hot stone into it, and then applied to the wound.

The treatment of a man who has been so wounded that his intestines protrude is a crude and gruesome business. A man so wounded sits on the ground while a companion withdraws as much of his viscera as possible and lays it out on the sand beside him. The injured man then takes a deep drink of water, and all present watch to see if any of it escapes from the parts visible. If no leakage is observed it is presumed that the man has suffered no internal injury, and his organs are washed and replaced. Certain plants are then obtained which may be used either singly or in conjunction. These are *dirrbuk*, a small carrrot-like root, and *lauwarr*, a kind of grass. These are pounded between stones and then inserted through the wound into the abdominal cavity in order to keep the organs in position. If neither of these plants are to be obtained, almost any substance may be used.

The external wound is then painted with white clay and a dressing made of *warrkarr*, the bulb of a large lily, is applied, after which the man is bound round with strips of paper-bark. Nothing

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then quickly presses the affected part into the open centre of the creature, whose tentacles immediately contract and cause a certain amount of suction. The member is held there for a considerable time, and when withdrawn the raised exterior is said to have been removed and clean bleeding flesh, which will soon heal over, exposed. Another form of treatment for such sores which is used more particularly by tribes further inland is to prepare in the following manner some dogs' excreta. This substance is wrapped in a piece of paper-bark and rolled and kneaded until it is soft. Small pieces of bone or other foreign substances which have passed through the animal are then extracted, and the excreta placed and bound upon the affected part.

For influenza, fevers, and general aches and pains the following are the more generally used preparations.

(*a*) *Kauulurr*, a coarse kind of grass. This is pounded between stones and mixed with water. It is used both as a liniment and taken internally.

(*b*) *Balparayan*, a fairly large tree with light-coloured leaves and fruit like a small green apricot. The soft outer bark of this tree is scraped off and the gum which exudes is mixed with water and rubbed on.

The two above are sometimes used in conjunction as an embrocation, but the *balparayan* is not taken internally.

(*c*) *Kuninyi*, a shrub with large dark-green foliage. The leaves are treated as in the cases above, and are used as a liniment. The small cone-like fruit is taken green, crushed, and eaten as medicine. The ripe fruit is eaten as food.

(*d*) *Muttirr*, a small tree with very rough light-coloured leaves. These leaves are prepared in the usual way, and the preparation rubbed on the affected parts.

(*e*) *Karaika*, stringy-bark tree. The young shoots of this tree are crushed and steeped in water, which is then drunk. This is regarded as a very effective remedy for coughs.

(*f*) *Baku*, a trailing cane. This is prepared in the same way, and is used as a liniment and also taken internally.

One method of curing a cough is to eject some *yal*, sputum, into a small shell, close the shell with a leaf or piece of paper-bark and

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757 place it in the fire. It is said that within a few days at most of doing this the cough will disappear.
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The ever-present *kal-kal*, green ant, is employed as an emetic. These insects are crushed between the palms of the hands, mixed with water, and swallowed. It is said that violent vomiting is thereby produced.

For diarrhœa a small brown fungus which grows on the bark of certain trees and which is called *bulogun* is taken roasted on the coals then scraped into water, which is drunk cold. The young shoots of a tree called *narini*, chewed and eaten, are also said to give relief from this complaint.

757 Such are some of the remedies and modes of treatment employed by these aborigines in endeavouring to overcome their various complaints, injuries, and diseases. In the preparation and adminis-
[887] tration of the various remedies it is the old women who are chiefly engaged. The *marrngit*, magician, deals only with those cases
[756] where the patient's condition is believed to be directly due to the operation of evil magic.

T. THEODOR WEBB

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CHAPTER THREE

Early Days and Strange Contacts

797 177 MANY small hordes came to Yirrkala within a few weeks of our arrival and set up their camps on the beach. I found I had a lot to learn from them before presuming to teach. Curiosity had lured them to the station where this white family had come with the unheard-of intention of living permanently in their country and growing food where food had never been found. Some of them had not met a white man, and seeing a white woman was a new experience for most of them.

Their habits, customs and beliefs were separated from ours by a thousand generations, and they could not understand our equipment and tools; agricultural implements, fencing wire, carpenter's and blacksmith's tools were of no greater significance to them than our small wireless set for receiving and transmitting messages to our nearest neighbours one hundred and fifty miles away. They understood that this wireless enabled us to communicate with the outside world, and as a test case Marupla asked me to 'wireless' and tell his friends to come in from Caledon Bay! A few days later there was rumour of a killing in a distant horde, and when I asked how the news had come, one man nonchalantly remarked: 'Oh, might be wireless.'

● [757] Medicines were readily accepted, the most popular being a cough mixture with a liquorice and golden syrup base, which was always in demand for cuts and bruises! Patented tablets made their usual appeal, and doubtless influenced most aches and pains, at least by suggestion.

797 464 We offered the Yulengor employment in clearing the

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Sharks attack nomads, and inflict shocking injuries; crocodiles crush arms and legs. Bad wounds from these sources are treated with yellow hibiscus bark beaten into a pulp and applied every few days. In the case of bone-fracture, a few thick grass stalks are bound on as splints, and the hibiscus pulp is applied on the outside. The bark pulp is left on a wound till the pain and odour demand attention, and then both splints and pulp are renewed.

Even a simple break in a bone probably knits crookedly; when a compound fracture is suffered, if gangrene does not kill the patient, pieces of bone work their way out of the limb. Wounds become so painful, that further applications of the irritating grass and bark cannot be borne, and they are then left to Nature to flood and cleanse them with copious streams of pus. I saw one hunter who had sustained a compound fracture above the wrist from a crocodile. After a long course of Yulengor treatment, six inches of his forearm bone had dropped out, and the wound had healed. But thereafter he was unable to control his hand, and it flapped uselessly by his side.

An adult with a stubborn open sore will search at low tide for a large anemone, and place the sore in the centre of the soft mass. The anemone automatically contracts, and the patient then tears himself away and has a new, clean, bleeding wound which may heal without further treatment. A child suffering from stubborn sores is treated by its mother, who collects slug-like shellfish (*Onchidium*) and squeezes the juices into the sore. I am told that the juices cause a stinging sensation, as iodine does.

Back injuries are ineffectively treated by tying bush rope tightly round the body in the region of the pain, and intense pain is eased by applying hot wet sand. 'Charlie Sitdown' became paralysed from the hips down, but his misfortune did not prevent him from becoming influential and astute in his dealings. In time he obtained three or four wives and

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out it is assumed to be worth while patching him up; his organs are pushed inside and the hot spear-thrower, bark-pulp, and clay-plaster treatment is applied.

Severe constipation, with distended stomach, is known as 'or wah', and for this the leaves of a dry jungle tree are mixed in water and the fluid rubbed over the body. Crushed leaves are inserted in the nostrils and piled on the chest whilst the remaining fluid is poured into the ears. It is said to be essential for the patient to remain supine, so as to allow the fluid to run from the nostrils and ears down through the spinal column into the stomach. A second method is to make a meal from a long, spiral shellfish (*Cerithieder Telescopium telescopium*) found on the mudflats. It is good food at any time, but it is also regarded as a cure for constipation, in aiding the passage of fibrous foods; it has the smoothness of the oyster and looks like glutinous slime.

A third treatment is carried out by building a low platform of sticks, covering it with swamp grass, placing the patient on top and covering him with sheets of paper-bark. A fire is made under the structure from the wood, leaves, and bark of the 'boit' or iron-wood tree. This particular tree is always used for the fire. (It is the hardest wood I have seen, and when it is being milled severe irritation is caused to both nose and throat.) The patient spends most of the day on the grille, and from time to time is turned over; at sundown he is removed and plunged into a nearby creek or waterhole. Most assuredly he can expect to feel stimulated.

Diarrhoea is not a common ailment, for natural wandering habits reduce the danger of infection. Nevertheless, epidemics do occur, maybe through over-eating a good catch of turtle, or through hunger driving the food-gatherers to eat decomposing fish or meat washed ashore. A succulent herb, 'brokpili', found near fresh water swamps, is then crushed and mixed with water, and the rusty red mixture

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●757 [824] is swallowed, poured over the body, and into the nose and ears. It is said to be a purgative.

752 Toothache is unusual, for teeth are strong and well developed and are constantly exercised in masticating tough meat and fibrous foods. It was explained that if a tooth were to ache so badly that a kangaroo catch could not be eaten, the tooth would be treated, to temporarily quieten [824] it for the feast, by packing around it shavings from the wood of the 'moinjortj' tree.

757 Severe coughs and colds are seasonal and are aggravated by dipping the patient in a creek or by pouring water over him to ease an accompanying fever. Coughs are also treated [824] by sipping a mixture from the inner-bark of the stringy-bark eucalypt and a sweet grass soaked in water. Nests of green tree-ants are dropped on hot coals to stupefy the insects so that they can be collected and soaked in water. Their [825] particularly high content of formic acid remains in the water, and the mixture is renowned as a cure for a cough. A further potion is made from the greenish, high-smelling wax in wild-honey nests, which is mixed with water. It is said to taste like certain patent cough remedies and to produce a mild stinging sensation in the throat. When colds have settled in the lungs, a fire is made from pandanus palm nuts and covered with leaves and wet sand; water is poured over the sufferer, and leaves and hot sand are piled on him. It is said that the sickness is sweated out, and that the evil [753] spirit 'jumps out of his mouth to escape the heat'.

Headaches seem to be due to constipation, and to relieve them a certain white-ant nest is taken from the mangrove trees and burnt on the windward side of the patient. After inhaling the smoke for a day, he is said to lose the pain, or, to put it more strikingly: 'The sickness escapes from the smoke through his eyes, nose and ears.' Finally, he washes himself with sand or water—and, as an old man naïvely suggested, after listening to my informant: 'He has a smoke.'